

HOW THE ART WORLD FINALLY STARTED TAKING CERAMICS SERIOUSLY

The humble pot is now an object of desire – and commercial galleries have played a vital role in bringing about this transition.

Colin Gleadell, *The Telegraph*, 1 November 2022



Takuro Kuwata's porcelain totems, drip with bulbous, coloured pigment at the Hayward Gallery. Credit: Mark Blower

Reviews of a new exhibition on London's Southbank, *Strange Clay: Ceramics in Contemporary Art*, have focussed on how use of the medium has shifted from functional pots and plates into the realm of fine art. But the show, at the Hayward Gallery, also underlines the crucial role commercial galleries (i.e. the art market) have played in realising this transition.

This is a recent development. A contemporary ceramic art exhibition 10 years ago would never have credited such a glittering array of "supporting" galleries – White Cube, Hauser & Wirth, Gagosian and Stephen Friedman, to name but a few – all of which represent artists in the Hayward exhibition.

Works in the show from the 1980s and 1990s remind us of a time when ceramic art was still considered only as a craft. Now they can be seen as harbingers of a radical change in attitude – and value.

One of the most admired works is by David Zink Yi, a Berlin-based photographer and sculptor who developed an obsession with strange sea creatures. At the Hayward is a 14ft-long burnt and glazed ceramic of a grotesque vampire squid, a beast that lives at such depths it is usually only encountered in real life when one is washed up on the shore.

Here, it is laid out on the floor, its entrails exposed, bathed in coloured inks.

ALISON JACQUES



David Zink Yi's 14ft-long burnt and glazed ceramic of a vampire squid. Credit: Stefan Altenburger

It has been lent by Hauser & Wirth, one of the biggest and most powerful contemporary galleries in the world. The artist's auction record is £28,000 for one of these creatures, but the largest at Hauser & Wirth can cost up to £430,000.

Another of the exhibition's "supporters" is Gagosian, the biggest contemporary art gallery of all, which represents Edmund de Waal, famed for his 2010 best-selling book, *The Hare with Amber Eyes*. Groups of small works by de Waal can sell for up to £215,000 at auction, and more privately.

Once, contemporary ceramic or clay works would have been sold in design auctions. Some still are. But more and more, clay sculptors like Los Angeles artist Ken Price, represented in *Strange Clay* by Brussels gallery Xavier Hufkens, are sold in more lucrative contemporary art auctions. Work by Price has sold for more than £400,000.

Grayson Perry's ceramic vases have risen from under £5,000 in 2007/08 to £250,000 in the last few years, since he became represented by the Victoria Miro gallery, and Magdalene Odundo, whose curvaceous pots could not be sold at auction 10 years ago when they were placed only in design sales, is now showing with the Thomas Dane gallery where her pieces can go for as much as £375,000.

Perhaps the most visible artist at the Hayward is Japan's Takuro Kuwata, whose 3m-high glazed porcelain totems, dripping with bulbous, coloured pigment, not only grab the attention in the exhibition, but also feature on the cover of the catalogue, the exhibition poster and bag.

"When I started working with him seven or eight years ago, his work was seen in a design context," says his dealer, Alison Jacques.



Takuro Kuwata 3m-high glazed porcelain totem features on the cover of the Hayward catalogue. Credit: Alison Jacques, London © Takuro Kuwata/Robert Glowacki

“But he and I both wanted to change that, for him to be seen as a contemporary artist, bringing a contemporary sensibility to pottery.”

Their success can be measured in sales, particularly in America, to the influential Rubell family and to museums in Florida and California. Jacques sold several examples at the Frieze Art Fair this year for up to £56,000 each, and the larger pieces at the Hayward would cost nearer £140,000, she says.

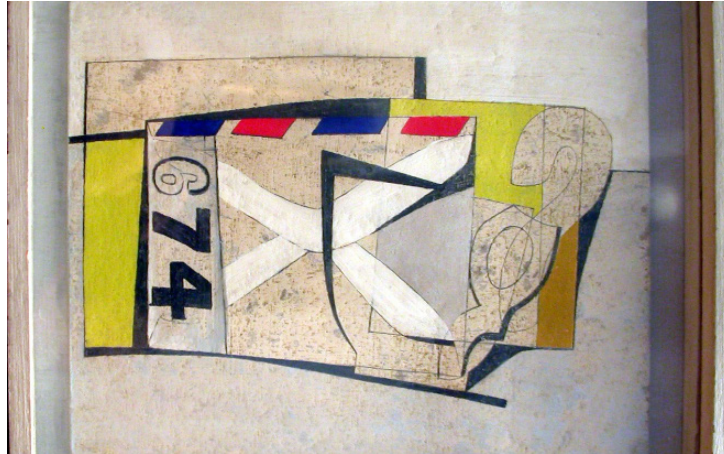
“It used to be thought that dealer support for exhibitions like this involved a conflict of interest for the institutions,” says Jacques. “But it’s now accepted as a symbiotic relationship – part of a new ecosystem. Museum budgets are so constrained they can’t make shows like this without support.”

“Some of the bigger dealers might give money. We paid for shipping Kuwata’s exhibits from Japan.”

Another example of dealer support is the display of *My Place is the Placeless* by Iranian artist Shahpour Pouyan – 33 clay models of diverse domes, each based on a building from the 33 modern countries that came up when Pouyan took a genetic ancestry test. The work had originally been shown, split up and sold by the Dubai gallery Lawrie Shabibi. So when the Hayward expressed interest in exhibiting it, the artist and his gallery agreed to recreate it, at no cost to the Hayward.

“What none of us want, though,” says Jacques, “is for dealers to determine what the curators show. They decide that; we just help them show it. It’s our job to promote our artists.”

One of the more successful stands at this year’s Frieze Masters fair in London’s Regent’s Park was staged by Osborne Samuel in honour of the all-but-forgotten director of the British Council’s fine art department, Lilian Somerville (1905-1985).



Ben Nicholson's 674, 1945 Oil and pencil on panel. Credit: Christies, June 2006

Described in 1966 by one critic as “probably the most influential woman in the British (perhaps international) art establishment”, Somerville not only acquired the best of British contemporary art for the council’s own collection, but ensured it had maximum exposure abroad, both in diplomatic residencies and high-profile exhibitions like the Venice Biennale.

The artist who benefited most was Henry Moore who declared: “The British Council did more for me as an artist than any dealer.”

Osborne Samuel’s tribute, with a well-researched catalogue, was the first in memory to celebrate “Diamond Lil”, and was rewarded with multiple sales of period works by artists whom she promoted. Apart from Moore, there were sales of works by Kenneth Armitage, Reg Butler, Lynn Chadwick, Robin Denny, Ivon Hitchens and Ben Nicholson – mostly for six-figure sums. The exhibition continues at Osborne Samuel’s gallery in Dering Street W1 until Nov 11.

Having been a front-line dealer in modern masterpieces for most of his life, Thomas Gibson now mostly works as an adviser. Anyone who saw the exceptional \$100-million collection formed by US lawyer David Solinger, with its Miros, Giacomettis and de Koonings, when it was on view at Sotheby’s during Frieze week prior to sale in New York on Nov 14, might be interested to know that Solinger’s heirs took advice from Gibson on where to sell and how much for.

“At the time, I didn’t know that the \$1 billion Paul Allen collection would be sold at Christie’s,” Gibson tells me. But it turns out he was right to plump for Sotheby’s where it will get star billing. “He had a superb eye for art,” says Gibson, “matched only by his skill at mixing Martinis.” Unlike the Allen collection, which carries a financial guarantee that everything will sell, Gibson advised Sotheby’s not to guarantee Solinger’s collection. “It’s so good and the estimates so measured, it doesn’t need a guarantee. The family will also not have to share the proceeds with a third party as they would if it was guaranteed.”